



April 8, 2011

To: Honorable members of House and Senate Redistricting Committees
From: Janice Thompson, Common Cause Oregon
Marge Easley, League of Women Voters of Oregon

Thank you for your hard work on a challenging task, developing a redistricting plan on a tight timeline that balances the multiple criteria that govern this critically important process.

Thank you also for conducting the extensive set of hearings across the state to obtain input from Oregonians on how they define communities of interest in their areas.

Oregon's redistricting criteria are among the clearest and most detailed in the country. Public hearings across Oregon are a commendable feature of our state's redistricting process not seen in all other states. Nevertheless a good process can be improved and we respectfully suggest these additional principles to inform the 2011 redistricting process:

- 1) Everybody deserves representation, which is why the Census counts everyone, including young people and others who can't vote. Redistricting should consider not only electoral opportunities but also ensure effective representation.
- 2) It is both legal and good public policy to factor race into redistricting. It is also critical to do so if the Oregon Legislature is to reflect the growing diversity of our state.
- 3) District shapes should be determined by careful consideration of all redistricting criteria. Some shapes that look odd may be appropriate to preserve communities of interest.
- 4) The Legislature should not conduct "sweetheart" redistricting, but rather consider the full range of allowed criteria when drawing new district lines.
- 5) Redistricting should be transparent, with public input sought after draft maps are prepared by the Legislature, in addition to the hearings to obtain initial input.

Regarding principles one and two, we realize that race cannot be a predominant factor in redistricting, but it is a factor that deserves priority attention when balancing all the criteria and drawing new district maps. Redistricting should avoid splitting population centers of communities of color due to state and federal law banning the dilution of minority voting strength and the need to facilitate representation of historically disenfranchised groups within our increasingly diverse state.

Regarding principle three, because communities come in all sizes and shapes, a district can't be evaluated by its appearance. Some may appear misshapen, but keeping a community of interest intact could involve drawing a district with an odd shape to reflect population patterns and redistricting criteria.

Regarding principle four, Oregon law dictates that lines cannot be drawn for partisan advantage. The concern, however, is that violating this criterion could be avoided in a plan with "sweetheart gerrymandering" or new maps that enable each party to maintain the same number of districts it currently controls to the detriment of consideration of other redistricting criteria.

Regarding principle five, we strongly urge that draft maps be made available as early in May as possible to allow time for additional testimony before the legislative deadline on June 30th. Due to time constraints we recognize that these hearings will likely need to be held in Salem. Without another round of public input on draft maps, however, the initial set of hearings becomes a hollow exercise.

We urge you to not repeat what happened in 2001. That year's HB 2001 pertaining to legislative redistricting with the accompanying maps showing new district lines was presented in a public hearing with testimony only from legislators except for one letter submitted by a member of the public. That hearing lasted slightly more than an hour and was followed by a work session on the same day. In 2001 SB 500 pertaining to congressional redistricting had only one hearing in the Senate that lasted almost two hours. Legislators dominated the testimony on the Senate side though there were two members of the public there and some written testimony, primarily from local governments. The work session on SB 500 was held the next day. In 2001, like this year, there were hearings prior to presentation of the new district maps, but essentially no opportunity for public input on draft maps. We urge that you not repeat this second element of the process ten years ago and provide meaningful opportunities for public review and testimony on draft maps.

We recognize that you are operating under a tight timeline but would appreciate your releasing a calendar working backwards from June 30th that includes target dates for introduction of legislation and public hearings on draft maps.

As noted earlier, we offer these suggestions in the spirit of improving a good redistricting process. We believe that these ideas would improve redistricting that will affect all Oregonians over the next ten years. Thank you for your consideration.

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